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Expedited Reagan's Philippine Shift

Congress Enjoys New Foreign Policy Role

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WASHINGTON—When Sen. Paul Laxalt advised Ferdinand E. Marcos to relinquish power earlier this week, it marked the culmination of five months of intense congressional involvement in the affairs of the Philippines and provided an example of what many members view as a new, more constructive role for Congress in American foreign policy.

As Marcos was settling into a life of exile on Friday, many lawmakers claimed credit for precipitating his downfall by forcing President Reagan to withdraw U.S. support from the embattled Philippine president.

"I don't think the President would have abandoned Marcos without pressure from Congress," said Sen. Joseph R. Biden Jr. (D-Del.).

Not only did Congress influence the situation through the normal legislative means, many lawmakers such as Laxalt, the Nevada Republican, Sen. Richard G. Lugar (R-Ind.) and Rep. John P. Murtha (D-Pa.) played highly visible, personal roles in the unfolding drama in the Philippines. Lugar led the official U.S. delegation to monitor the February election; Murtha was a member of that delegation.

Members of Congress emphasized that their role in the Philippine crisis had demonstrated an extraordinary measure of bipartisanship—a welcome departure from the obstructionist role that congressmen have frequently played in the years since the Vietnam War.

"This is what I prayed would happen," said Lugar, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. "It was bipartisan consultation at it's best."

It also was the most stunning example of a trend that political scientists have seen developing for some time. In the last year, they have credited congressional pressure with persuading Reagan to adopt sanctions against the South Africa and take a more active approach to arms control talks with the Soviet Union.

At the same time, Congress has been tearing down many of the legislative barriers that it once built against direct involvement by the Administration in various parts of the world. Both the Boland Amendment restricting U.S. actions against the Marxist regime in Nicaragua and the Clark Amendment banning aid to the rebels in Angola were repealed in 1985.

"There has been a cooling off period and an effort to build a consensus between the Congress and the President in foreign policy," said Thomas E. Mann, executive director of the American Political Science Assn. "Reflexive fights are not the norm now."

Mann cautioned that efforts to develop consensus frequently do not succeed. Although Democrats have made a number of efforts to compromise with Reagan on the President's proposals for aid to the Nicaraguan rebels, for example, the two sides remain at odds.

But Lugar said he has already begun talking with Democratic opponents of the President's request for aid, asking them "whether we can shape something here that has a bipartisan characteristic similar to the Philippine operation."

Republicans and Democrats worked together on the Philippine crisis, according to Lugar, because they feared a divided Congress would have closed off any opportunity for a peaceful transition of power in Manila.

Biden noted that Congress essentially sided with Secretary of State George P. Shultz against several members of the White House staff who were cautioning Reagan against breaking with Marcos—even though the Philippine president apparently had stolen the election from opposition leader Corazon Aquino.

"It occurred because of the bankruptcy of the Reagan foreign policy," said Biden, a member of the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee. "People in the Republican Party are now doing what a loyal party should do—saving the President from himself."

Some members of Congress argue that they should not get as deeply involved in diplomacy as they did in the Philippines. "I have a problem with some members of Congress thinking they are secretary of the world," quipped House Republican Leader Robert H. Michel of Illinois.

And Norman Ornstein, a congressional scholar with the American Enterprise Institute, added: "Diplomacy is not in the job description of a member of Congress."

In recent years, a number of members of Congress have made what Ornstein described as "free-lance" efforts to meddle in diplomacy. For example, former Rep. George Hanson (R-Idaho) went to Iran in 1980 seeking release of American hostages, and Sens. John F. Kerry (D-Mass.) and Tom Harkin (D-Ind.) went to Nicaragua last year to negotiate with Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega.

Unlike these earlier examples, however, the actions of Laxalt, Lugar and others in the Philippines were undertaken with the expressed approval of Reagan and Marcos. Perhaps as many as a dozen Congress members visited Manila in recent weeks.

P Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman Dave Durenberger (R-Minn.) argued that the personal involvement of these lawmakers reflects their increasing sophistication in foreign affairs. He noted that many young congressmen, such as 35-year-old Rep. Dave P McCurdy (D-Okla.), have taken time to specialize in international topics.

"There's a lot more smarts coming out of Congress today than the Administration," Durenberger said. "We're not a bunch of dumb bunnies in Congress. We're a pretty smart, well-traveled group."

Although Laxalt's call to Marcos—in which the senator advised him to "cut and cut cleanly"—helped bring an end to the crisis, it was by no means the last chapter of Congress' involvement in the Philippines.

House Speaker Thomas P. (Tip) O'Neill Jr. (D-Mass.) announced Friday that he is sending Rep. Stephen J. Solarz (D-N.Y.) to the Philippines to invite Aquino to address a joint session of Congress, and many members predict Congress will provide increased U.S. aid to her government.

In the wake of what they view as a foreign policy victory for Congress, many members, including Lugar and Kerry, are also talking about stepping up pressure for free elections in Nicaragua, South Korea and Chile similar to those held in the Philippines.

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